



ZENA LATTO

This interview was conducted by Linked Jazz as part of their work to promote the careers of women in jazz. In 2015, staff at the nursing home River Garden Hebrew Home contacted Carnegie Hall about resident Zena Latto, who performed with a band of female jazz musicians at Carnegie Hall in 1957, on the same night as the famous benefit concert for the Morningside Community Center, hosted by Carnegie Hall. Not having any documentation of this event, Carnegie Hall then established contact between Zena Latto and Linked Jazz.

Interviewee: Zena Latto (1925-)
River Garden Hebrew Home
Jacksonville, Florida
(Sherese Jackson, Irena Ragaas, Skip Wallbach)

Interviewers: Cristina Pattuelli and Karen Hwang
Linked Jazz
Pratt Institute, School of Information and Library Science
New York City, New York

Date: March 25, 2015

Description: Transcript, 14 pp.

Original Format: Video recording of Skype interview

*Zena Latto added details/corrections to the interview upon reviewing the transcript, sent to Linked Jazz in September 2015. Such revisions are indicated in brackets.

KH

Today is March 25, 2015, and I am Karen Hwang with the Linked Jazz Project. I am here today with jazz musician Zena Latto in Jacksonville, Florida, talking with her via Skype from New York City. Cristina Pattuelli, director of the Linked Jazz Project, is also with me.

So, hi, I'd like to begin by discussing your background. Can you tell me where you were born, and where you grew up?

ZL

New York City in the Bronx, New York, and I lived there until 1975. Couldn't take it anymore. [laughs] It was falling apart. Old buildings. Everybody was on strike in buildings, because we didn't get heat, you know, and water and stuff like that.

Prior to that time--this was in the 70's--in 1940 my sister [Claire] took me to the Paramount Theater. That was the biggest theater to see big bands in New York. And we sat up front. And she was the Benny Goodman nut, and I fell in love with him and the clarinet. And I said, "I'm gonna be a clarinet player." And I walked around. I went to [Wurlitzer], and I signed up. I got a metal clarinet. I took lessons, and I got to meet Benny. And he would advise me on what kind of books to buy. I met him in 1941. I made sure--backstage, you know. He was a doll to me. He took me to recording dates, to--what do you call it--rehearsals, and one time he took me in the band bus. Out in Long Island they had the Billy Rose Theatre. There's a moat of water in between. He put me in [...] the side of the theater. I can't think my mind's gone! [laughs]

To remember all those things! What a thrill to ride back with all the guys in the band [...].

KH

So in some ways your sister was a big jazz fan, and that was how you came to be introduced to jazz.

ZL

"How can you go there? Don't go to him he will throw you out." Everybody was saying that, the whole--my two sisters: "You should be ashamed going there." You know? You don't know! I had a rough life. [laughs]

So I moved away from New York and got--I moved to New Orleans, and my sister [Claire] lived there, too. [inaudible] She found me an apartment, a shotgun, and I made my way. But I had my band in New York way back then. Oh, I had the Moderne Moods. [inaudible] I joined the Sweethearts in '45, I meant '46. You're getting me all confused. [laughs]

[I played with the International Sweethearts of Rhythm from 1951 to 1955.]

I got a picture. Everybody thought I was crazy. They were afraid I was going to become one of the girls that hang out with the guys, you know. I hung out with the guys, but nothing like that. No, everything was music. And one day I went to Benny, and I said, "I want to take clarinet lessons."

IR

And here's a quick picture. Oh, I'm sorry. Just a quick picture from--

ZL

From my band.

IR

We can try to take it and send it to you if you need it.

KH

Oh, that would be great.

CP

Actually we will talk at the end because we might need it. [laughs] If you can, send it to us.

IR

Okay.

KH

So Benny Goodman?

ZL

--wouldn't take the time to teach me, but he would take me to rehearsals and, you know, the recordings. He wanted me to learn. And one day he was playing at the Hotel New Yorker in New York, and I was backstage-- well I was in the--I got so much to tell you!

Took me through the kitchen, and the band was already set up. And he put me in the trombone section and said, "Listen!" That was his way of teaching me: "Listen to the band." And I had all these guys surrounding me. You don't know what I went through.

And he brought his wife up and introduced me. He called me the mascot of the band. I don't know if it's an insult, but the guys in the band--my middle name was Rita--so the guys in the band used to call me "Senorita!"

You know. But he was wonderful to me, really. He's a wonderful musician. [...] He wanted me to go and work in his office with his international Benny Goodman fan club [the 400 Club]. I said, "No I want to be you." [laughs]

CP

Good for you! [laughs]

ZL

Yeah, no, I was working in the office but, you know, but I had jobs. I was typist, a bookkeeper, everything.

But I did this. And I remember when I would come home from work, I'd wanna practice every night. And on Friday night, when my family got together for supper: "Cancel your appointment! You don't go to your musical lesson." I went to my music lesson. You gotta keep pushing and pushing and pushing.

You getting anything? [laughs]

KH

So when did you start playing the saxophone?

ZL

1946. That's when I met the Sweethearts. I went and bought my clarinet. My mother, oh! With the saxophone, my tenor sax. You ever hear of Lester Young?

CP

Yeah.

ZL

He played with Count Basie's band. I got to know him, and I says, "I'm learning to play the saxophone, will you--I'm going to take lessons." And he took me. He said, "I'll go with you, and we'll pick one out." And he went with my mother and me at 11 o'clock. He stayed up all night just to go, and he picked out my Conn tenor for me and all the equipment. And he was a doll. I tried to emulate him, but it was hard. Then there was Dexter Gordon. Another great tenor man.

What? You're getting it down?

Yeah, but it was--I'm trying to think back.

KH

How do you remember the jazz scene in New York? What was it like back then?

ZL

Epic. I used to hang out on 52nd Street. That was the place to be. Clubs everywhere. We'd go in and out. Saturdays and Sundays. And I met Art Tatum. A friend of mine [Slam Stewart] was playing with his trio and--You know? I don't know if you know Art Tatum?

CP

Yes we know, we know him, yeah.

ZL

I almost went through the floor. You know, it's fun. I met so many celebrities. And there were bad scenes on 52nd Street. I don't know if I should tell you.

CP

Oh yes, please tell us. We want to know.

ZL

Well there were a group of girls: student musicians. And we'd go down there to listen to the music. That's all we wanted to do. And there was a rough cop that was on duty there. He'd curse us out, you know. We had black and white friends, and... But one day I was told that he beat up one of the girls, left her body in the doorway just about three doors from the Three Deuces. I wrote to Mayor LaGuardia--at the time, he was the mayor of New York. And I wrote a full letter complaining about this cop. Well, he was thrown off the beat. They got rid of him. He was a very prejudiced cop. In those days white and black couldn't go together.

IR

Zena, you should tell them [inaudible]

ZL

Oh I didn't get to that yet.

IR

Oh okay.

ZL

Yeah, I'm still in New York City! [laughs] Yeah and then we started organizing. In '49 I met this--I heard they were playing at the, let me see. No, '46 we went down, and I went with my girl, a black girl, [Jean Davis], a trumpet player. I'm still in touch with her, and she took me to--And they told her Ms. Jones was the manager of the band. Her daughter played in the band. And she says, "Would you wanna join the band?" I says, "At a moment's notice." She says, "When we come back, we'll call you." And whilst--she had me and my girlfriend--and we played little gigs. We had a quartet-like, 'til she organized the other girls together again. And, let's see, then shortly after 1950, she says, "You gotta get a baritone sax." I didn't own one. I was going to music school. A jazz school near walking distance from where I lived with my mother. And I went to the dean, and I said, "Can you get me a baritone sax?" "I'll get it for ya." I said I had the offer to go. Well, I had been taking lessons, playing with the band there. And he went to New Jersey and bought--

[Skype connection freezes. Connection lost and reestablished]

KH

I think you were talking about baritone saxophone, the baritone sax. And then it cut out. I don't know what happened.

ZL

I played the E flat, 'cause I played only B flat. And the first night I played the theater with them, and I was so nervous coming in backstage to set up, and I bumped into the [laughs] my horn, and I broke one of the top parts. And the key, you know, but I went and played the jobs, just holding the horn. And then when we got to town, there was a music store, and I got it fixed. I was walking around in circles, going backstage, you know. Lots of people, lots of show people coming in. That was my first experience with them. We had wonderful experiences with the band, and we had been run out of town. They didn't like us. My roommate at the time was a black girl, a Muslim, and we stopped at a gas station. And she stood on the white line, you know. We had black bathrooms and whatnot. She was in front of me, and says, "Can't you see I'm white!" And the sheriffs got us out of there, and they had horns blowing. We had all kinds of things.

One time I could tell you. I think we played it in Tennessee. We had a wonderful band, three girls, white girls, in the band at the time, though we had an Oriental, and somebody in the theater yelled, "There's white girls up in the band!" And the sheriff came in, and they got us off, the three of us. We ran backstage. There was a restaurant

right there, round tables, and each of the people at the tables took us under to hide us. I said, "This sounds like Germany." You know? I said, "What is it? Adolf Hitler's coming after us?" But they never found us. They were always trying to do stuff. People were trying to do things. They didn't like the idea of the band being mixed.

I thought one time of writing a book of my travels. It's very hard. I used to write. I had belonged to a jazz club, a correspondence club, called the Jazz Network. I wrote some articles. One was "Remembering Benny Goodman and All That Jazz". And I wrote one part of, you know, "I learned about America", and something I said, "I didn't like what I saw", you know. But I wrote a big article about him, you know, and the clubs and how I got to meet him and all that. I used to do a lot of writing then.

[I participated with the correspondence club from 1995 to 2000. The Benny Goodman article was written in 1997.]

When I got to Loyola, my friend--he just retired--John Mahoney--he was the head of the jazz department. We became buddies right off. He was scared of me. I was scared of him, and he was much younger than me. But we had a great band there. I had to audition for the band [...]. This was after I left the Sweethearts and moved to New Orleans. And they gave me a thing called "Cherry Point", the Count Basie number. And it was so fast, you know, I said--they all stood behind a screen, all the teachers--I said, "Hey wait a minute, I can't play that fast!" They accepted me into the school.

Playing tenor sax and clarinet. [...] I played with the big band, and one time Woody Herman came. Everyone used to come to perform for us. And I had--I was supposed to be clarinet soloist with the big band--and he fronted the first band playing, and then I came on with the big band. My legs were shaking so you'd never believe it. I got up there, and I said, "I feel like I'm Benny Goodman playing, and my dream has come true." But the next morning I was walking around, across campus to classes, and professors started stopping me: "You played better than Woody Herman!" And I said, "No, I don't!" [laughs] We had crazy times there.

So many came back that I knew from New York. They performed, and the minute they heard--buddies, you know--musicians are like family. When I traveled on the road, you know, it was a beautiful thing. We played all kinds of dances, mostly black dances, you know. I remember we played opposite Erskine Hawkins' band and--I met so many good people.

They got bored with me. [about the people in her room]

CP

We don't. We want to keep hearing you. How was it for you, you as a woman to, was it easy to find gigs and to be able to work steadily? Or it was difficult for you and your bandmates?

ZL

When I--I had to quit the band--in 1956, '53, my mother got so sick with cancer, I had to quit the band to take care of her down there. And I took care of her, and I worked in an office part-time. And then when I worked in that office, I got a call at home at night: "They're having a jazz female concert at Carnegie Hall." And a man asked me, "Can I come to your office?" and talk to me. I didn't know who he was. I said, "Sure." I thought he'd forget about it. And he came to my office, and he asked my boss permission if he could talk to me. They said, "Sure!", you know. And he said, "We want to put you on the jazz festival. We got your name from local [802 Musician Unit] in New York and music community, and we wanna have you play at Carnegie Hall." They were friends of mine that were already picked, but there a girl that was supposed to come from California, an alto sax player. She couldn't make it, so they took me on tenor and clarinet. And I went to, it was, let me see, September, November 29th, 1957. And the bad part is my mother had died three months before, and I was a nervous wreck. But I went out there, and what they did to me. They said, "We don't like clarinets." And I had prepared something real good. I was a good clarinetist. And they said, "You play the tenor."

But I went through, and I called my sister in New York. She was still living there. And I said, "I'm playing Carnegie Hall", and she said, "You're a liar." They didn't believe anything I ever did. But that was real.

KH

Do you remember what you played?

ZL

What?

KH

Do you remember what songs were played that night?

ZL

Not really. [laughs] It's been a long time. Melba Liston who played with--what's his name--Dizzy Gillespie's band played in the concert. We had an organ player. We had a

lot of people. And then I got my band together, you know. And for a while I played an Off-Broadway show in Greenwich Village. And I've done a lot of things.

CP

This was in the 50's?

ZL

60's--that I played in Greenwich Village, you know. Things were slowing down. I went to see Benny Goodman at a concert, and he died shortly after that, and I cried. But, I'm trying to think of something else.

CP

Well that night November 29 of 1957--when you played at Carnegie Hall--we know that there was a big concert at the same time.

ZL

Oh! I didn't even know about it! And Dizzy came to visit with us, and he talked to me and to Melba. And we more or less opened the show for him. And he had his band come out and play after, but after? We got out of there so quickly, we didn't know it. Did you, are you familiar with Gino who works over Carnegie Hall?

CP

Yes, yes, yes, Gino Francesconi. Yes.

ZL

He has copies of the concert. He says, "I never heard that it was a band", you know?

CP

He told us he never heard about it.

ZL

[inaudible] at midnight. 'Cause all the musicians I used to know were playing. So then I went back to office work. Then I got sick and I moved to New Orleans in 1975. And I went to college, and I got my degrees.

[I studied music and received a Bachelor's Degree in Performing Arts from Loyola in 1985.]

[interruption on Zena's end]

ZL

So did I tell you enough?

SW

Zena has a lot of good stuff.

KH

Yeah we would love to be able to talk to you again, but if your time is short here, then maybe we can schedule another interview session. We'd love to hear more.

IR

You feel like you want to talk now.

SJ

Do you want to keep going right now?

ZL

I'm near the end. [laughs] Suddenly I moved to New Orleans. I went to the junior college.

[Delgado Junior College, where I earned an Associate Degree.]

They wanted me under rehab, because I had been ill. And they wanted me to be a--whatchamacallit--a hairdresser. I said, "No." But they needed teachers for the typewriter and other things. And I can type, so I was teaching the students, the people that were coming in for rehab, too. And I--They said, "Do you do anything else?" And I said, "Yeah! I love music." I'm teaching over at the free university. It was the public library--volunteer. I had a sign on the wall that I made: "All That Jazz". And I did it in June and in September. We packed the people in, you know? It was hot weather in New Orleans. And they finally gave us the big auditorium, and the people that were coming, packing in, they were there dancing to the music, you know, like Benny Goodman's band. They loved Benny Goodman. But I taught the history of jazz from way back to modern times with the girl musicians and stuff, you know? And then that almost faded. I don't know. I graduated in 1985. I was 60 years old. I'm an old lady! [laughs] I'm 89. I'm gonna be 90.

CP

Well you look fabulous. So strong.

ZL

I'm not ashamed of my age. I've been there! I've done it! [laughs]

CP

Your voice is the voice of a young woman. It's true! It's so strong.

ZL

I've been playing the clarinet here. People are amazed. Suzanne [Lyda] set it up for me in the room. I can practice an hour every day, and I was doing so good, but I had a crazy roommate who made a nervous wreck out of me. And I dropped my clarinet, and the mouthpiece broke, and some of the keys went bad. I had put it in the shop, and Suzanne took everything. She took care of everything. And I even bought a new mouthpiece. I was playing the Benny Goodman style of mouthpiece: Selmer. They talked me into buying a--what do you call it?-- a Japanese one, and I bought it. It was terrible. So I said, "Get me a Selmer", and they didn't have any more of them. They don't make the horn mouthpieces that I used to play, so it's slightly narrow. So I'm having a little-- a lot of trouble--getting my armature back in place. But I gotta play. Marty Getz--who's the CEO of this place--he heard about me. He wanted me to give a concert, and I said, "Soon!" I was really playing good, getting my old Benny Goodman sound back again. I'm getting it slightly again, but I then knocked off, and I'm getting sick off and on, you know. That's what happens when you get old. [laughs]

[Segment 2, 13:30-15:10 discussion regarding photos she will send]

ZL

[discussing one of the photos]

My mother lived to come see me play at the Apollo. She brought eight girlfriends of hers. She was an elderly lady, and when [...] the curtain came up, she kept going, "That's my daughter!" [laughs]

SW

She was a fan as well? Of the group?

ZL

Of the Sweethearts. Yeah. Playing at The Apollo.

SW

The Moderne Moods as well, or just the Sweethearts?

[many talking at once. inaudible.]

ZL

I had them. I lost them. I was in Katrina.

CP

Do you have the names of the musicians who were in the band with you? In the Moderne Moods band? Do you remember the names of the musicians?

ZL

Most of them are dead.

SJ

Let's see is this it? Is it on the flyer?

ZL

Yeah one girl's name is on it. Anita Gibson. She played vibes with me, and--oh let me see--we had a bass player, a woman bass player. I can't think of her name. She was an older woman, but she was good. Oh, Anita played the piano, too. Piano and vibes. There were about five pieces, I think.

[Jean Bredwin, drums; Gladys Straker, bass. There were also other members that played with us at different times: Mal Waldron, piano; Mohammed Saed, piano; Gildo Mohanes, piano; Victoria Barksdale, piano.]

SW

It'll come back.

ZL

It was good. A good band. They liked it. We played a lot of the old stuff. But the swinging stuff. They loved us, loved us at that club.

[Segment 2, 16:40-17:10 discussion, not part of interview]

ZL

I got to know one of the famous musicians that played with Benny Goodman's band. You ever hear of Slam Stewart? Standing bass player. I got to know him real well, and he would have me--sometimes he'd be working with Benny--he played in clubs in New

York--he'd have me bring my [tenor] horn and play with the group. [inaudible] Actually I was a nervous wreck.

SW

As you said, they were like a family, so I'm sure that they got to know each other, and the different musicians that they traveled through town--

ZL

And when we traveled on the road we would meet bands, like from Woody Herman's band and all. It was exciting.

CP

It was a great community.

ZL

Yeah! You always felt at home. Oh! When I was with the Sweethearts, I played the--not the Earle's Theater-- one of the big theaters in--I think it's been closed up--we played there.

[It was the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C. and was in December of 1954.]

And we followed Duke Ellington's band. I knew Duke Ellington, but that's another story. I used to go to his rehearsals. His band played there, and we didn't know it, but we came on the stage. A baritone sax player [Charlie Fowlkes] all of a sudden--I had a solo on my baritone--and he yelled, "Go on Zee! Go on Zee!" [from the wings]. He had played with a lot of the big bands in New York, and I knew him. And then we all got together with Duke's band and went out for coffee. Duke was very nice--not Duke--yeah, Duke Ellington.

He introduced me to his wife, called her the "Madame". But there--I met so many. I think I'm very lucky. I wake up in the morning. I have all these pictures. It keeps me happy.

[Segment 2, 19:33-21:32 discussion, not part of interview]

[END]